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Capitalist transformation, social violence and transnational migration. The Obama-Clinton legacy in Central America in macro-sociological and strategic perspective

James Cohen

1 Only one of the two major candidates in the 2016 presidential election had an established record in foreign policy while the other most decidedly did not. For that reason, among many others, it was assumed throughout most of the campaign that Hillary Clinton would soon be taking charge of the presidency. Although she did not achieve that goal, it remains important to understand her strategic orientation and her legacy as Secretary of State of the U.S. (2009-2013) because in this position she, and the president she was serving, did leave an intelligible legacy, the study of which can contribute to our understanding of the contemporary world order.

2 This article draws attention to U.S. policy in a group of countries that are not usually considered to be of great strategic importance: the republics of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, which make up the so-called "Northern Triangle" of Central America. However insignificant they might seem at first glance in a strategic perspective, it can be argued that U.S. policy in these countries over the past few decades, including the Obama era, provides important clues about how the U.S. exercises power in the international political and economic system, whether Democrats or Republicans are in power.

3 Obama and Clinton have left two parallel legacies in Central America: the first has to do with a major political event and the second takes the form of an ongoing, ordinary pattern of relations. The political event was the military coup d'Etat in Honduras in late June 2009 against elected president Manuel Zelaya. It was staged by a group of military

officers and businessmen who removed him from his house at night, flew him out of the country, and declared that political life in Honduras would proceed without him. He was accused of trying to organize a referendum to extend his term of office, but such a move was impossible. The authors of the coup were mainly concerned about the defense of dominant class interests which they saw as threatened. Although Zelaya was himself a member of the landed elite, he began during his term of office to move in a direction that could be described as "slightly leftward". According to a Foreign Policy in Focus analysis:

> Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez offered discounted oil to Honduras and Zelaya accepted. He developed modest but real new domestic initiatives, including raising the minimum wage, which infuriated the business community. And he began to collaborate with the foreign policy initiatives of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, the Venezuelan-led political alliance. His leftist rhetoric and populist programs won him a degree of domestic political support from organized *campesino* groups and some trade unions (...). At the same time, his increasingly radical rhetoric infuriated sections of the traditional elite, and the political class began to turn away from Zelaya. He lost the support of his own political party in the Congress (Thale 2009).

4 The coup against Zelaya was condemned by the UN, the European Union, the Organization of American States (from which Honduras was suspended), and even, initially, by the Obama administration, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was less determined to see the constitutional order restored in Honduras than she claimed. There is much investigative research showing how Hillary Clinton supported Zelaya's overthrow once it occurred (for example, Joyce 2010; Weisbrot 2009, 2014; Shorrock 2016). Despite numerous public declarations and diplomatic gestures intending to convey the impression that the U.S. was attached to restoring democracy, in practice she allowed those seeking to keep Zelaya from resuming his term of office to gain time and took an active role in promoting the idea of post-coup elections that did not include Zelaya but opened the way for the civilian promoters of the coup to assume power. Such elections did take place in November 2009, when interim coup president Roberto Micheletti was replaced by "legally" elected president Porfirio Lobo. The military coup was relayed into a civilian one.

5 Hillary Clinton mentions these events briefly in her book *Hard Choices* (2014), a 500-page memoir about her four years as Secretary of State[1]. However, in the paperback version of the book she removed the sentences, included in the hardcover edition, in which she explicitly admits her objective of making the return of Zelaya impossible:

> In the subsequent days [after the coup] I spoke with my counterparts around the hemisphere, including Secretary Espinosa in Mexico. We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot and give the Honduran people a chance to choose their own future (quoted in Beeton and Tang 2016).

6 As a result of the coup and the post-coup regime, dozens of social activists have been assassinated, including a very prominent one, Berta Cáceres, 44, renowned leader of indigenous struggles against the construction of dams and other projects on the lands of the Lenca people. Before being cut down on March 3, 2016, Berta Cáceres spoke out about the role of the U.S in upholding the coup and the danger this policy represented for movements like hers. Since 2009, assassinations of activist leaders have continued on a regular basis (Weisbrot 2016) and social movements have been forced to operate with extreme caution under threat of physical risk.

7 Although the record shows that Hillary Clinton took the lead in handling this matter in 2009, Barack Obama, as president, was also called to account for the coup. He did first condemn it as illegal, but he was content at the North American Leaders' Summit a few days after the coup, to make the following statement:

> The same critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras, are the same people who say that we're always intervening and that Yankees need to get out of Latin America. You can't have it both ways. (CNN politicalticker, August 10, 2009)

8 To this statement, John Ackerman, Mexican legal scholar and political commentator, has replied:

> The idea that the the U.S. can "not intervene" in Latin America is a fantasy. It is always present. The question is not whether they intervene but how they do so. Is it in favor of authoritarian regimes, or in favor of democratic social movements? (Ackerman 2015, p. 70)

9 In the meantime, Honduras' social and economic situation has deteriorated greatly. Already before the coup, Honduras suffered from high levels of chronic social violence and deep social inequalities; those conditions have only deteriorated in recent years. According to estimates from 2010 and 2011, about 60% of the population of Honduras lived in poverty as well as 37% of the population of El Salvador and 54% of that of Guatemala (CIA World Factbook, quoted in Rosenblum and Ball 2016). A Migration Policy Institute Report states that "all three Northern Triangle countries continue to experience high levels of violence, food insecurity and poverty, the primary push factors, contributing to migration outflows from the region" (Rosenblum and Ball 2016, p. 3).

Macro-sociological and systemic mapping

10 Although the U.S. role – and that of Hillary Clinton in particular – may be considered open to criticism by any standards of "democracy promotion", the objective of this paper is not simply to criticize this episode in U.S. policy, but above all to examine it as symptomatic of broader and deeper tendencies in U.S.-Central American relations, and U.S.-Latin American relations more broadly, over the past several decades. The forms of endemic social and paramilitary violence spoken of here will seem familiar to anyone who has observed Colombia or Mexico, but contextualizing and explaining the Central American situation requires specific attention to conditions in these countries. How can different forms of endemic violence be seen not only as feeding into each other, but as products or symptoms of the more systemic logics of neoliberalism as it has taken form over the past 3-4 decades. The following is an initial attempt to map out the field in a way that shows how these locally observable trends reflect deeper regional and systemic ones.

11 Immigration is a convenient and revealing starting point for this investigation. Much attention is currently being paid to what has caused so many Central Americans, women and minors in particular, to flee their countries and attempt to reach the United States these past several years. In the summer of 2014, a crisis was declared on the U.S.-Mexican border when a surge in the number of arriving women and minors took place. In May and June of that year alone, about 20,000 Central American children arrived at the southern border, mostly in Texas. For fiscal year 2014, a record of over 65,000 apprehensions of minors and children were recorded at the border (Meyer et. al. 2016, p. 1). These flows have fallen and risen various times since then, but they have not ceased. As the director

of a child protection agency in Honduras has declared, "Central America has become a factory of migrants. There is no access to resources, to economic or educational opportunities and no trust in government actors... These people are not chasing the American dream – they're fleeing a Central American nightmare" (García 2015).

12 Much has been written about the conditions under which these migrants have been received in the U.S., their conditions of detention, their difficult battle to be recognized as refugees (for example, Meyer et. al.; Hiskey et. al., 2016; Chishti and Hipsman, 2016). There is also a growing body of research about the current U.S. policy of prevailing on Mexico to capture and deport back to Central America as many of these migrants as possible before they reach the U.S., too often with disastrous results for those forcibly returned to the environments they were fleeing (Domínguez Villegas and Rietig, 2015). These are important subjects in themselves, but they are mostly symptoms of the broader dynamics mentioned above.

13 Starting with these flows which have elicited a strong security-oriented response from the U.S., we may then ask, in a sociological perspective, about the "push" factors – the social and economic conditions of life – that have driven so many Central Americans, including many women and minors, to migrate in spite of all the risks. This in turn leads to questions about the transformations of capitalism in Central America over the past 20 to 30 years since the end of the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, and about the implications of these transformations for political institutions – in other words, how has neoliberalism affected the democratic transitions in each country?

14 Sociologist William I. Robinson has carried out his well-known theoretical work on transnational capitalism against the empirical backdrop of Central America, in particular in the book *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change and Globalization* (2003). In the chapters of this work focusing on the recent history of several Central American countries, he shows how U.S. policy during the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, under Reagan, was not just about defeating revolutionary movements (unlike the one which had triumphed in Nicaragua in 1979) by supplying weapons and training to the local armies and paramilitary groups; it was also, and simultaneously, about imposing on governments, in the midst of civil wars, via USAID, programs to reorganize their private sector and reconfigure the state in ways compatible with neoliberal social and economic policies. While it is not possible here to examine in detail his account of the transformations undertaken, it is important to stress the correlation he establishes between neoliberal capitalist transformation and a given type of political regime characterized as polyarchy:

> When US policy makers and transnational elites talk about democracy promotion, what they really mean is the promotion of polyarchy. This refers to a system in which a small group actually rules, and mass participation and decision-making are confined to choosing leaders in elections that are carefully managed by competing elites. ln the age of globalization, polyarchy is generally a more reliable political system for containing and defusing mass pressure for popular social change (Robinson 2007, p. 33).

15 There has indeed been a form of transition to democratic rule since the 1980s but the notion of polyarchy marks the limits of democracy under neoliberal conditions:

> At the level of the dominant project, the old authoritarian regimes have crumbled through transitions to polyarchy, and leftist movements that in the 1980s posed an anti-systemic alternative to integration in the emergent global order have been defeated or transformed. In each Central American country, a transnationalized,

> "technocratic" or New Right fraction gained hegemony within the dominant classes and pushed the transnational agenda of neoliberalism and the consolidation of polyarchies (Robinson 2003, p. 65).

16 In the Central American regimes established after the civil wars, democracy has progressed in some respects but it is combined with a top-down diffusion of neoliberal norms and mechanisms. The exercise of rights by ordinary citizens has been plagued by endemic social violence and continuing selective violence against activists of the left (see Moodie, 2010, for an excellent study of the Salvadoran case that illustrates these points).With such regimes, regression toward authoritarian rule is a possibility; the coup in Honduras is the one most obvious case of such regression.

17 Another important ingredient of this socio-historical configuration is the politics of free trade. The Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement, referred to in short as CAFTA-DR, which covers the region's economic dealings with the U.S., took effect in 2004. It includes all the Central American countries except Panama. Whatever its advantages for some sectors of industry, there is ample documentation to the effect that the agreement has resulted in the displacement of many farmers from their land; in the maintaining of poor wage standards and labor conditions, especially in export-related industries; in the opening, of large quantities of land for mining, thanks to environmental deregulation; in major obstacles to the passage, in any of these countries, of any regulatory legislation, because of investor state dispute-settlement mechanisms which allow the corporations, almost always, to prevail (Pérez-Rocha 2014; Public Citizen 2014). Much more research needs to be done on the effects of this agreement on living standards for Central American workers, and on environmental standards in those countries.

The roots of local and transnationalized and social violence

18 In 2012 the rate of murder per 100,000 people in the population was over 90 in El Salvador, and over 85 in Honduras, as compared to 53 in Venezuela, 33.8 in Colombia, 4.7 in the US and 1.0 in the UK (Igarape Institute, quoted in *The Guardian* 22 August 2015).

19 The high levels of violence in these countries today clearly has several different but inter-related sources. The heritage of the civil wars and the counter-revolutionary paramilitary groups and death squads from the 1980s and early 90s is not to be minimized (Dudley 2012, p. 7-8). Guatemala has a specific heritage of genocidal violence against indigenous peoples during an extended period of civil war (1960-1996). However, these periods of prolonged conflict cannot alone explain today's high levels of social violence.

20 The status of Central American states in the regional and international order – that is, their status of dependent state formations in historic situations of dependent capitalism, may be said to have already "predisposed" these societies to high levels of social violence, because these state formations were among the most oligarchically-controlled, despotic and violent as anywhere in Latin America (Munck 1984). These were indeed the state formations and national spaces which, along with Nicaragua, gave rise to what historian Walter LaFeber characterized as "inevitable revolutions" (LaFeber 1993). While the Cold War, that is, Soviet and Cuban influence real or imagined, served as a the lens through which the Reagan administration claimed to read events in Central America in the 1980s, LaFeber shows clearly that the roots of revolutionary movements in all these countries

were "endogenous", that is, not explainable as pure proxy wars between superpowers, but rather as uprisings against durably inegalitarian and despotic forms of rule resulting from a long heritage of colonial and capitalist dependency.

21 From a more immediate and contemporary perspective, the social violence with which the countries of the Northern Triangle are rife has a strong transnational dimension, not just because of transnationalizing capitalism and its overall socio-economic effects, but also because of a particular category of actors who are a product of this configuration: young deportees from the U.S. back to Central America, among whom are many transnationalized youth gang members. These gangs, which originated in the U.S., principally in the Los Angeles area, were transplanted to El Salvador, Guatemala and other places via the deportation of gang members. Their activity has contributed greatly to the already-endemic social violence that has plagued the cities of Central America, especially its northern tier. Salvadoran historian Joaquín M. Chávez writes:

> The appalling social impacts of the neoliberal reform implemented by ARENA[2] governments in urban and rural communities, and the institutional weaknesses of the country's judicial system, its National Civilian Police and other state agencies that were created as a result of the peace accords – as well as the endemic lack of public services and labor and educational opportunities in urban communities like San Salvador – have all enabled the rapid expansion of gang networks among socially marginalized Salvadoran youth (Chávez 2016, p. 211).

22 The U.S. has contributed powerfully to this problem by deporting to Northern Triangle Countries large numbers of convicted gang members. Between 2001 and 2010, the U.S. deported 129,726 convicted criminals to Central America, over 90% of whom went to the Northern Triangle. With these deportations the two most important gangs of Los Angeles, Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18, have also become the two most important gangs of the Northern Triangle region, with anywhere between 60,000 and 95,000 members active depending on estimates (Dudley 2012, p. 8-9; see also Zilberg, 2011).

23 Drug cartels, usually associated with Colombia and Mexico, are of growing importance in the Northern Triangle as well. The authors of a Migration Policy Institute study write:

> Over the past two decades, organized crime has taken control of critical economic activities in Mexico and the Northern Triangle. Non-institutional actors – particular drug cartels – have overrun and transformed the social landscape, challenging the government's monopoly on the use of force, while corruption has spread and taken deeper root at various levels of government and law enforcement. (Papademetriou et. al. 2013, p. 17).

24 There are clear indications of a correlation between the coup in Honduras and the appearance of cartels which have found safe havens in portions of the Honduran territory, in particular near the border with Guatemala. Today certain cartels are acquiring land on which to develop safe havens, and they are doing so by forcing people off that land by threatening them with death if they do not sell or simply cede their property. The majority of the targeted populations are communities of indigenous people living in the area near the northern coast of Honduras (McSweeney and Pearson, 2013).

25 What is taking shape in such regions has been described by Canadian researcher and investigative journalist Dawn Paley as a form of drug war capitalism, that is, a form of accumulation of capital that involves much violence and dispossession exercised by the cartels while complicit politicians look on (Paley, 2014). Honduras is relatively new to this type of scenario, in part because cartels based in Mexico have developed bases outside that country to escape the heat of military pursuit there. Drug war capitalism, argues

Dawn Paley, needs to be understood in its systemic dimension, that is, as part of the *regional and world system* of transnational capitalism. Here is a brief summary of her analysis:

> The war on drugs is a long-term fix to capitalism's woes, combining terror with policymaking in a seasoned neoliberal mix, cracking open social worlds and territories once unavailable to globalized capitalism. (...) The notion that there is a clear division between state forces and crime groups – that corruption and collaboration are the work of a few bad apples – is a hegemonic idea promoted by nation-states and the mainstream media. Undoing this binary means learning from the people whose lives have been directly affected by armed groups whose activity is carried out with impunity. Impunity is not the result of a weak or deficient state, but rather it is actively provided to the gamut of armed groups who commit crimes and acts of terror against citizens, migrants and the poor. The provision of impunity to armed actors who are politically aligned with capitalism is part of a modern nation state's *raison d'être* (Paley 2014, p. 16-17).

26 Paley's claim that drug war violence is a "fix", that is, functionally necessary for capitalism, is very bold but highly debatable and has generated much debate. Her observation that state forces and crime groups are often impossible to tell apart is verified in several case studies that she has carried out in Mexico, Colombia and the Northern Triangle.

U.S. responsibilities and policy choices

27 The overall picture of Central American societies as modeled by neoliberally-inflected capitalism since the mid-1980s needs of course to be completed but in terms of general levels of well-being and security, the record is rather dismal and the problems posed to these societies appear intractable. As we begin to establish connections and map out the field of class relations, power relations, and international and transnational relations in which these countries are situated, it is necessary to understand the precise role of the U.S. as a power and of U.S.-based corporations in contributing to such a dire situation. The problems of social violence we are foregrounding here are chronic and could also be called systemic, but that does not mean they are generated automatically, or "functionally", by a transnational capitalist system independently of the will of powerful political actors. Political choices do count a great deal, as the discussion of the Honduran coup was indeed meant to suggest.

28 The dimension of choice may be in part obscured because of the high degree of continuity between Democratic and Republican administrations in Central American policy since the 1990s. Whoever has been in government since the 1990s, the U.S. as a power has allowed the situation in these countries to degenerate to the point where there is now an immigration "boomerang effect" which calls Washington's attention to the situation in these countries in a way that poverty and endemic violence alone would not.. The Democratic Obama administration proved no exception. Far from making serious efforts to favor economic and social development in these countries, it continued to treat violence and migration at best as security issues, that is, at the level of symptoms. Regarding migration, the policy has been to try to diminish the number of arrivals from Central America by prevailing on Mexico to arrest as many of the migrants as possible and deport them to their home countries, where they return to the same dismal

conditions as before and are often exposed to the very violence they were trying to escape (Dominguez Villegas and Rietig 2015).

29 The U.S. has established programs with El Salvador and other countries to coordinate the surveillance and the policing of gang members. At the same time it has remained U.S. policy to deport as many "criminal aliens" as possible back to their home countries since it is taken for granted that that is where they belong. Efforts to actually transform the social environment in which crime and violence flourish have not amounted to much. The relevant U.S. program, known as CARSI (Central America Regional Security Initiative), has existed since 2008, under Bush, and has been financed at the rate of roughly a billion dollars to date. Its mission is defined as follows:

- Assist law enforcement and security forces to confront narcotics and arms trafficking, gangs, organized crime, and border security deficiencies, as well as to disrupt criminal infrastructure, routes, and networks;
- Build the capacity of law enforcement and the justice sector to serve citizens and to address regional threats;
- Advance community policing, gang prevention, and economic and social programming for at-risk youth and communities disproportionately affected by crime. (source : http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/carsi/)

30 From this mission statement it is clear that nothing is envisioned to deal with the problems at their socio-economic roots. The prevailing policy framework, not surprisingly, is geared to the needs of U.S. society and fails to take a regional view.

31 Few people anywhere in the federal government have been thinking about alternative approaches to these problems. However, a few members of Congress have showed signs of broadening their view and taking into account regional dynamics and not just national ones. Among them are Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona, who have made an effort to understand the social conditions from which many migrants are fleeing. In July 2015, Grijalva organized hearings in Congress on the question of unaccompanied minors (Hendley, 2015). Sanders' program for immigration, as elaborated on his 2016 presidential campaign website, was the only program of any candidate to address immigration as a transnational question and not just of narrow national interest. The program reads in part:

> Inequality across the world is universally acknowledged as the driving force behind migration. (...) For example, the ill-conceived NAFTA devastated local economies and pushed millions to migrate. (...) Not only have our trade policies with Mexico, Central America, and China led to the loss of millions of decent-paying jobs and thousands of factories, but they have led to destitution for local communities around the world. Accordingly, our nation must level the playing field for workers everywhere. Those who wish to remain in their home country should be able to earn livable wages and not [have to] migrate for economic survival. (...) Multi-faceted policies that look beyond our borders are critical to addressing the root causes of migration and economic inequality (from "A Fair and Humane Immigration Policy" on the website "Bernie 2016").

32 There is little use discussing today the approach of Hillary Clinton, but there is little reason to believe that she might, as president, have undertaken bold action to change the prevailing pattern of relations. As for Donald Trump, there is less reason still to believe that his administration will do anything to remedy these problems, and much reason to believe things will only be made worse, since one of his main campaign commitments, confirmed in the first few months of his administration, was to accelerate the

apprehensions and deportations of undocumented migrants. His narrowly nationalistic and xenophobic approach to migration is a way of simply denying any U.S. responsibility for the grim situation in the Northern Triangle, or anywhere else. As was predictable, his budgetary proposal for 2018 calls for less aid to Central America overall, and more measures in the name of "security" (Hiemstra 2017). The goal of promoting "prosperity" exclusively by encouraging more capital investment under existing social conditions is certain to continue generating more insecurity and contributing to the spiral of social violence.

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NOTES

1. The paperback edition, with this sentence expurgated, was published by Simon & Schuster in 2014.

2. ARENA: *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*, a right-wing political party founded by Roberto D'Aubisson in 1982 in the middle of the civil war. D'Aubuisson was known for his role in organizing death squads. ARENA presidents were victorious in four straight elections from 1989 to 2004 and governed the country for two decades.

ABSTRACTS

Whichever party has been in office, the U.S. since the 1980s has strongly promoted the adoption in Central America of neoliberal policies and mechanisms of government while taking no effective measures to combat at its roots the tide of social violence that such policies have helped to engender. The policy of deporting migrants, including many gang members, back to their countries of birth has only further caused violence to spiral as recently established democratic regimes struggle with issues of basic civil order. The coup d'Etat in Honduras in June 2009, which the Obama administration first condemned but then upheld, serves as an extreme example of how such policies can undermine the social order and open the door to authoritarian regression. The purpose of this article is to begin to account for prevalent forms of social violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador) macro-sociologically, taking transnational migration into account, but also strategically, that is, by examining U.S. policy orientations.

Quel que soit le parti au pouvoir, les Etats-Unis, depuis les 1980, promeuvent en Amérique centrale l'adoption de politiques et de mécanismes de gouvernement néolibéraux sans pour autant prendre de mesures efficaces contre la montée de la violence sociale que de telles politiques ont contribué à engendrer. La politique consistant à expulser de nombreux membres de gangs vers leur pays de naissance n'a fait qu'aggraver les violences chroniques, pendant que des régimes démocratiques peinent à établir l'ordre civil. Le coup d'Etat au Honduras en juin 2009, d'abord condamné par l'administration Obama, puis défendu, constitue un exemple extrême de la manière dont de telles politiques peuvent miner l'ordre social et ouvrir la porte à des régressions autoritaires. L'article vise à rendre compte des formes courantes de violence sociale dans le Triangle Nord de l'Amérique centrale (Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador) dans une perspective macro-sociologique, en prenant en compte les migrations transnationales, mais aussi de façon stratégique, en examinant les orientations de la politique étatsunienne.

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Keywords: Central America (Northern Triangle), Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, social violence, neoliberalism, migration, transnational gangs, drug wars
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